# Designing an Effective Evaluation Agenda

## U.S. Department of State Fourth Annual Conference on Program Evaluation
## June 7-8, 2011
## George C. Marshall Center

# Increased Interest in Federal Agency Program Evaluation

- Rising federal deficits increase concerns about improving government accountability and performance

- OMB Evaluation Initiative aims to strengthen federal program evaluation and its use in decision making through:
  - posting evaluations on-line,
  - establishing interagency group to share expertise, and
  - funding some new rigorous evaluations and capacity building efforts

# Request from Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Subcommittee

How ensure that agencies use the evaluation resources they have to provide the information necessary for effective management and legislative oversight?

Examine agencies with known evaluation capacity to learn:
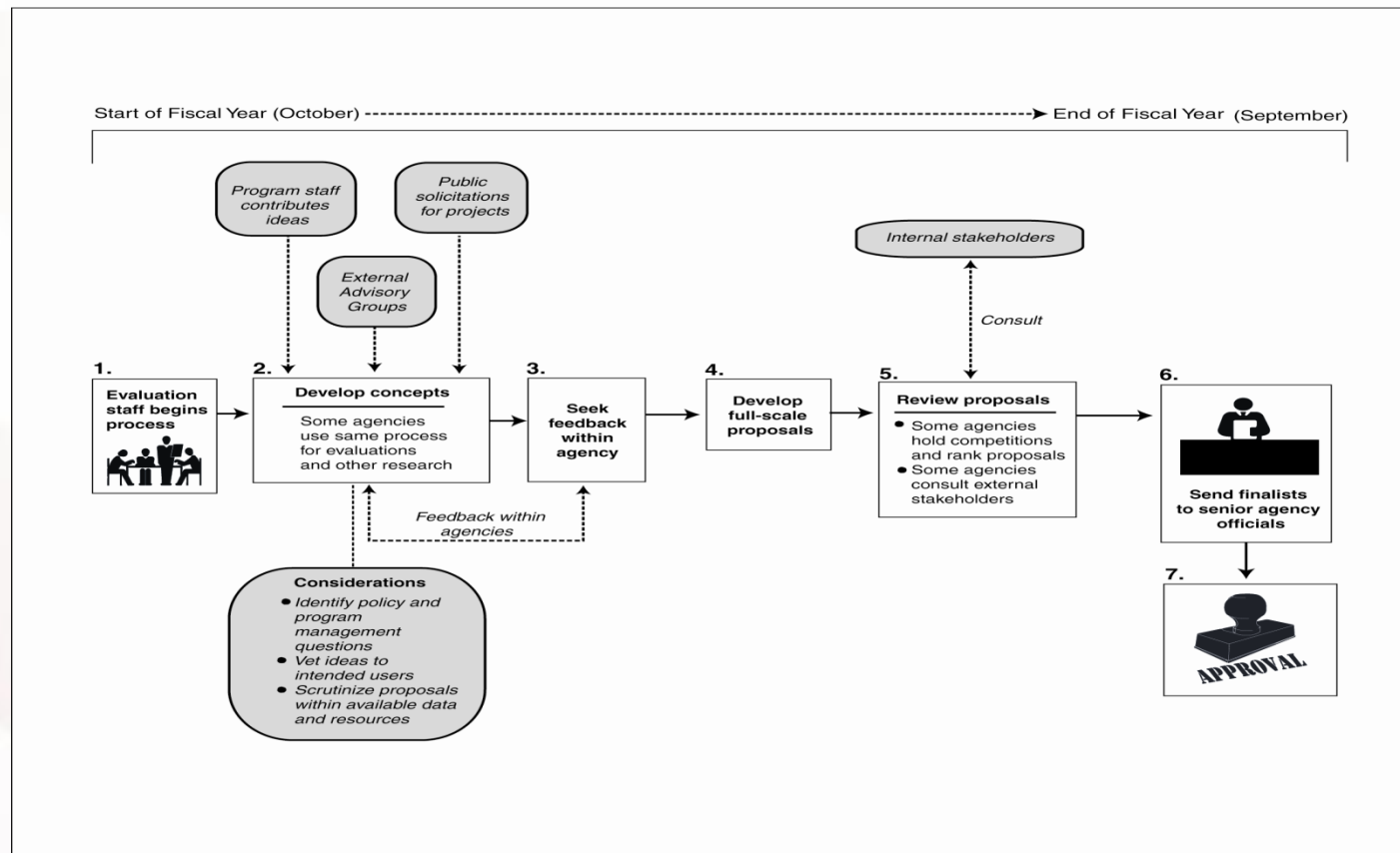
1. What criteria, policies, and procedures do they use to determine which programs to review?

2. What conditions influence an agency's choices?

# Three Departments with Different Approaches

- HUD – highly centralized

- Education – 2 parallel centralized evaluation offices

- HHS – decentralized
  - ACF – 1 centralized evaluation office

  - CDC – highly decentralized, divisions within centers

# Agencies Followed a Similar Model of Informal Evaluation Planning Policies



Source: GAO analysis.

# Common Types of Criteria Used to Prioritize Proposals

- Strategic priorities – major program or policy areas, focus of concern or a new initiative

- Program-level concerns – a more narrowly identified problem or opportunity

- Critical unanswered questions – evidence gaps

- Evaluation feasibility – data availability, persuasive design, grantee capacity

# Conditions Influencing Choices and Process

- Location of evaluation funding

- Scope of evaluation unit's responsibility

- Reliance on program partners

- Congressional oversight

# Concluding Observations

- An effective evaluation agenda provides credible, timely answers to important policy and program management questions – so it's important to consider all four criteria

- Other agencies may want to follow the general model where evaluators lead an iterative process with stakeholder input to identify important questions and feasible studies

- Agencies may need to adapt the model, however, to meet their own organizational and financial circumstances

- Early input on program and congressional stakeholder concerns can help ensure evaluations serve effective management and legislative oversight

The full report "Program Evaluation: Experienced Agencies Follow a Similar Model for Prioritizing Research" (GAO-11-176) is available on the Web at
http://www.gao.gov/Products/GAO-11-176

Contact:
Stephanie Shipman, Assistant Director, Applied Research and Methods
by email: Shipmans@gao.gov or phone: 202-512-4041